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ABSTRACT

Communication is crucial to a good school-community relationship. In Middle Tennessee, parents in 52 schools and 20 school systems were surveyed to determine how they received school information and how they would prefer to receive the information. Previous research suggests that schools can develop a reputation of candor and dependability through good public relations; teachers and their communication with parents significantly affect public opinion regarding the school; the influence of practitioners in school-community relations relies on their personality as well as on their knowledge; and means of school-parent communication may include parent conferences, letters, open house, and parent assistance with special activities. The results of the survey show that the parents' chief means of receiving school information were through the students, the students' report cards, phone calls or notes, personal visits to the school, and the school open house. Parents reported that they would rather receive school information through their children, their children's report cards, phone calls or notes, personal visits to the school, and parent-teacher conferences. According to the survey, parents generally receive school information through the means they prefer. Three tables, 9 references, and 19 reference notes are included. (RG)

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A STUDY OF METHODS OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION BASED ON RESPONSES OF PARENTS OF SCHOOL CHILDREN IN MIDDLE TENNESSEE

A Research Paper Presented to the
Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association
in Mobile, Alabama
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	1
Purpose of the Study	1
Importance of the Study	1
Research Procedure	1
Literature	2
Presentation and Analysis of Data	8
Reference Notes	13
List of References	14

LIST OF TABLES

Page

Table 1..... 9

Table 2..... 10

Table 3..... 12

INTRODUCTION

The well established principle of in loco parentis has governed the relationship between school officials and students for many years. However, communication between those representing the school and parents of school age children (students) is often unplanned and unstructured. This hiatus in communication results in numerous misunderstandings each school year between school administrators and teachers, on the one hand - and parents, on the other.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purposes of this study were to determine how parents receive information from schools concerning their children and in what form they would prefer to receive it.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

There are many reasons why effective school-parent communication is vital to overall educational effectiveness. Parents cannot function as the "home partners" of teachers and principals if there is a lack of communication - or of meaningful communication. The needs and problems of students need to be clearly communicated to parents. Also, information to parents concerning school priorities, needs and activities is vital to a healthy school-community relationship.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

A questionnaire was developed to determine by what methods

parents actually receive information about their children's schools and how parents would prefer to receive such information. Parents rank ordered sixteen methods of communication in terms of how they actually received information from schools and how they would prefer to receive it.

The study included responses from parents in 52 schools and 20 school systems in Middle Tennessee. Some 750 questionnaires were distributed and 418 returned (55.7%). School administrators and teachers enrolled in classes of the authors of the study and those attending educational conferences at Tennessee Tech participated in the study.

A standardized S.A.S. statistical package was used to determine the significance of the data. The .05 level of significance was accepted as the criterion for data relationships.

LITERATURE

School and community relations is an organized and continuing process to provide understanding between schools and their communities. The need for good public relations programs is apparent. Schools are not always able to control things that leave the public with a bad impression. But they can, over a period of time, establish a reputation of truthfulness, openness, and reliability.[1]

Teachers are an important influence in developing public opinion concerning the schools. Teachers are a vital key to the success of school and community relations because of their instructional responsibilities and innumerable face-to-

face contacts with parents. Abraham Lincoln observed that "public opihion is everything--with it, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed." In this age of mass communications the best program in the world cannot wait to be discovered.[2] Suggesting that the very future of education depends on the public relations efforts of teachers and school administrators does not overdramatize the situation.[3]

The number of educator-teacher contacts with parents are extremely significant in conditioning public sentiment. These contacts are made with students, parents, friends, neighbors, and other citizens of the community. These impressions have positive or negative effects upon school and community relations.[4]

The student's attitude toward the school and toward education is often influenced by his or her pleasant or unpleasant experiences in a classroom.[5] Student reaction to teachers and school administrators is very instrumental in molding public opinion. Students express their likes and dislikes of the school throughout the community. Occasionally students exaggerate and distort the facts, but usually they give a fairly accurate picture of educators and their relations with students in the learning process. Most educators are sensitive to the value of good public relations with students in the learning process.[6]

An educator's influence in building good school and community relations depends not only on the importance of professional knowledge and skill but also on his or her personality.

Desirable personality qualities include a liking for people, concern for their needs, sensitivity, tact, poise, adaptability and a sense of humor.[7]

The tools for conducting public relations are varied and numerous but their effectiveness lies in matching the correct tool or activity to the proper situation. There are limitless ways in which school and community relations can be improved. The person-to-person approach is perhaps the most powerful. An educator must realize that personal attitudes about education are contagious.[8]

Students who have something constructive done for them will respond more positive than those that have something done to them and so will their parents.[9]

The school's physical environment is likely to have effects upon the public relations program. For example, teachers have considerable control over the total school environment. Also, teachers should give careful attention to classroom management including cleanliness, temperature and lighting. Teachers can improve the classroom atmosphere by maintaining bright, pleasant surroundings. Student art, current bulletin boards, and displays can brighten the classroom. Teachers who involve students in maintaining an attractive classroom instills a feeling of pride in them.[10]

Another way in which the teacher can help to win goodwill of students is to send them timely and appropriate cards and notes. These cards and notes of congratulations for especially

praiseworthy in-school or out-of-school achievement are suitable to any age group. Cards and notes on a more personal type can be sent to students that are appropriate to their age group.[11]

Effective extra-class activities is one of the best approaches to the building of good student morale. The success of the program in fostering morale depends in substantial measure upon teachers themselves. Teachers who understand the potential values of activities, have the ability to guide students in their choices of activities, and understand their role as sponsors or coaches can provide the necessary stimulation which will result in student participation. The activities program can be an important factor in developing positive student attitudes.[12]

The concern of most parents for the welfare of their children makes the teacher an extremely important figure in the development of parental attitudes toward schools. Relations between parents and teachers are essential to school and community relations.[13] The importance of this partnership concept is evident chiefly in its effect upon the well-being and progress of the student. Good teaching and constructive relations with students will always be a primary path to parent understanding, support and cooperation. However, there are additional means and media available to the teacher to initiate contacts with parents themselves. One of the most promising means to establish contacts with parents is to invite them to visit the classroom during the regular school day.[14]

The teacher that has difficulty in getting parents to the

school may wish to visit parents in their homes. If a teacher decides that a home visit is desirable, he or she should make an appointment in advance. The visit should emphasize the help that parents can give in working toward the mutual goal of helping their child in the school program.[15]

In addition to the types of parental contacts that have been considered, there are other means for communicating with parents to enhance school and community relations. The following list offers suggestions but is by no means inclusive:

1. Group parent conferences that are conducted at least twice during the school year to communicate teacher goals and objectives. These meetings should provide an excellent forum for cooperation and build a strong foundation for public support once goals are clearly presented.
2. Individual parent conferences that are conducted every semester offers valuable information about the student to the parent. Parents should be told about the good things their children are doing along with improvements the child needs to make. The conference should be ended on a positive note. Valuable information can be gained from the parent about the student that will be of value to the teacher.
3. Sending general letters or newsletters to parents of students in a particular class offers a means of explaining learning objectives, course requirements, instructional methods, and class accomplishments.

The letter may have increased appeal for parents if the students help to write the letter.

4. A day to recognize parents and grandparents with a special program is an excellent way to enhance school and community relations.
5. Enlist volunteers to work areas of need, including the classroom. Be sure to have a Volunteer Orientation Coffee at the beginning of the year, and a Volunteer Thank You Tea at the end.
6. The periodic open house is the most rapidly accessible means of building a good public relations image. Children's work displayed is particularly of interest to parents.
7. Establishing "office hours" as a means of facilitating appointments.
8. In cases of clubs or other activities, send "thank you" notes to parents of students participating at end of activity.
9. Inviting parents to serve as assistants in connection with special activities or field trips, and inviting them to serve as resource persons.

The use of these suggestions or others should be used only when they will contribute to constructive home contacts and support broader objectives of the school for winning parental understanding and support. The use of too many contacts might well quash the interest of parents.[16]

A study of effective home-school relations was conducted

in Abbotford (Vancouver), British Columbia. The findings showed that parents actually learned about their children's schools from five sources: (1) the children themselves, (2) regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences, (3) school newsletters, (4) report cards, and (5) personal visits to the school.[17]

The study listed the five methods that parents preferred to learn about their children's schools. These methods were: (1) report cards, (2) school newletters, (3) regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences, (4) the children themselves, and (5) personal visits to the school.[18]

The results of this study were compared to a similar study conducted in Toledo, Ohio, in 1973.[19]

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data in this study are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2 which follow on pages 9 and 10, respectively. The mean and rank for each method of communication for how parents actually received information about their childrens' schools is displayed in Table 1. Similarly, Table 2 provides the same information concerning how parents preferred to learn about their childrens' schools.

Table 1 reveals how parents actually received information about their children's school. The primary methods of communication were "from my child," followed by "from child's report card," "personal visit to the school," "Telephone calls, notes, etc.," and "school open house." Generally, first hand sources of information from the school accounted for four of the high-

TABLE 1

How Parents Actually Received Information
About Their Children's Schools

Method of Communication (1)	Means of Rankings (2)	Rank (3)
From my child	2.36	1
From child's report card	4.24	2
Personal visit to the school	5.69	3
Telephone calls, notes, etc., from school	6.98	4
School open house	7.28	5
School newspaper, other publications	7.97	6
Scheduled parent-teacher conferences	8.15	7
Conversations with friends and neighbors	8.71	8
Local newspapers	9.03	9
Personal friendships with educators	9.49	10
School athletic activities	9.62	11
From neighbor's or friend's children	9.69	12
Radio announcements and programs	9.99	13
PTA-PTO or similar group	10.22	14
Direct contact from school administrators	10.74	15
Television	12.97	16

TABLE 2

How Parents Prefer to Receive Information
About Their Children's Schools

Method of Communication (1)	Means of Rankings (2)	Rank (3)
From my child	2.85	1
From child's report card	4.88	2
Telephone calls, notes, etc., from school	5.19	3
Personal visit to the school	5.69	4
Scheduled parent-teacher conference	5.86	5
School open house	6.03	6
Direct contact from school administrators	7.29	7
School newspaper and other publications	7.85	8
PTA-PTO or similar group	8.83	9
Personal friendships with educators	9.41	10
Local newspapers	9.73	11
Radio announcements and programs	10.33	12
School athletic activities	10.79	13
Conversations with friends and neighbors	11.01	14
From neighbor's or friend's children	12.69	15
Television	12.95	16

est ranked five methods of communication and for seven of the ten highest ranked methods.

The information in Table 2 indicates how parents prefer to receive information about their children's school. The preferred methods of communication were "from my child," "from child's report card," "telephone calls, notes, etc.," "personal visit to the school," and "scheduled parent-teacher conferences." First hand sources of information from the school numbered four of the highest ranked five methods of communication and for seven of the ten highest ranked methods.

Table 3, which follows, provides standard statistical analysis information concerning the data.

It seems that parents are, in general, receiving information concerning their children's school activities using the methods of communication they prefer. The actual and preferred methods of communication are the same in eight instances of the highest ranked ten methods on both lists. The only differences among the highest ten methods are that "direct contact from school administrators," and "PTA-PTO or similar groups," were on the preferred "top ten" and "conversations with friends and neighbors" and "local newspapers" on the highest ranking ten actual methods.

Teachers and school administrators should be able to improve school-community communication with information from this study. Improved communication between the school and those it serves should result in increased school support and mutual understanding.

TABLE 3

Statistical Information Concerning
The Data In This Study

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	T	PR> :T:
DIFF 1	0.495	3.177	1.60	0.113
DIFF 2	0.638	3.132	2.09	0.039
DIFF 3	-1.247	3.254	-3.93	0.000
DIFF 4	0.000	3.721	0.00	1.000
DIFF 5	2.304	4.118	5.73	0.000
DIFF 6	0.695	4.285	1.66	0.099
DIFF 7	-0.076	4.035	-0.19	0.847
DIFF 8	1.161	2.977	4.00	0.000
DIFF 9	0.342	4.085	0.86	0.391
DIFF10	-1.790	4.159	-4.41	0.000
DIFF11	-0.114	4.429	-0.26	0.792
DIFF12	3.000	4.801	6.40	0.000
DIFF13	-2.285	4.548	-5.15	0.000
DIFF14	-0.019	3.452	-0.06	0.955
DIFF15	-1.432	3.392	-4.31	0.000
DIFF16	-3.447	5.049	-7.00	0.000

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